



EDITORIAL

Player talent identification and development in football

Identificación de talento en el jugador y su desarrollo en el fútbol

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Sport has the power to captivate people watching and supporting or consuming sp in every country making it one of the most universal aspects of popular culture.¹⁻³ Approximately 4.1% of the worlds population plays football professionally, making it the worlds most popular sport. There are numerous more amateur and recreation players. The global interest and increased competitiveness of the sport has led to elite clubs scouting throughout the world for the best players and players with the potential to become the best.^{3,4}

Good players are not created overnight, but instead natural talent and ability must be nurtured in order to enable players to fulfill their potential. The processes that shape the success of sportspeople in any sport are conditioned by the player's response to the multiple environmental interactions and stimuli that are presented day by day. Consequently, it is important to regard the player as a multifactorial entity and assess if he will be able to adapt to the situations that are presented to him.

Talent identification is a key area within sports development. The identification of sports talent aims to detect, capture, select and promote the athlete who has the skills and competencies and thus the potential to ensure, as far as possible, the achievement of competitive success. Despite the fact that the international federated sport has been focused on dissemination and the promotion of specific plans for the development of sports talent, there is no

universal consensus, neither in the elaboration nor in the strategies of action, how to configure each of these plans.⁵ This has led to many countries developing their player identification programs in unsystematic and unstructured ways which can compromise the development process. Often, a trial-and-error approach, "collision theory" has been used, where the player collides with the sport for the one with the most casually conditions, rather than being selected as the result of an intentional, coordinated and systematic process.⁶ This could result in players with potential to succeed in one sport actually participating in sports that do not give him the best chance of success, and within a specific sport can lead to players ending up playing in positions that do not maximize their natural potential.

Talent needs to be identified at a young age so that it can be properly nurtured to develop top players. It is vital that athletes receive the best possible service in predicting their attributes and abilities, while some athletes arise by "spontaneous generation", others do so as a product of systematic search campaigns based on scientific and methodological criteria. There are four stages involved in the conversion of a talented player into an elite sportsman. These include detection, identification, development and selection. Different aspects of scientific support can be used in the last three stages. Despite the availability of scientific resources and expertise, many talent identification programs lack a strong scientific base.⁷

One of the biggest challenges facing football is the lack of good scientific and medical support within developmental structures. Player development is also a key goal and

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currently there are limitations on talent programs being run in several countries. The lack of good development structures means that very few players actually reach the highest levels of performance and compromises length of football careers, leads to players being more susceptible to injury and affects the results of national teams. The situation is even worse for female players since the highest female leagues are still amateur leagues.

Within any sporting domain, talent and potential alone does not automatically translate into capability and success. Talent identification is a multifactorial process and it is important to not only view the player as he is now, but look at what, with the right support he may become. There are definitely other variants just as important as the natural talent itself; such as the social, affective, motivational and temperamental factors.⁸ Who is more "talented", the athlete who possesses a series of skills suitable for a particular sporting specialty, or who has the best ability to adapt, over time, to the demands of training and competition?⁹

There has been progress within football development. Footballers are now provided with full physical training programs. The availability of more training tools and disciplines develop players that are not only good footballers but are also stronger and faster athletes.^{7,10} Often talent identification programs may be focused on physical performance or isolating specific fitness components rather than looking at all factors which are key for performance. Football is a multidimensional sport with players required to have different skills and capabilities in various disciplines to be successful. Historically talent identification programs have focused on objective but limiting physical skills, without taking into consideration the complexity of football performance.¹¹

Talent identification in football related to finding the potential in players to play at a higher level. It involves predicting performance over various periods of time by measuring physical, physiological, psychological, cognitive and sociological attributes as well as technical abilities. Performance characteristics tested during this phase must be based on those required during games.¹²

In football, components such as speed, agility, muscular strength and power are all important but just as key is the ability of a player to read the match, and use those fitness components within a football-specific domain. The brain obviously plays a large role, because of its astounding ability for neuroplasticity.¹³ Cognitive ability and visual-perceptual skills as well as general psychological skills are just as key as technical and physical skill in the process of player identification and development.

Player development is all about players learning specific technical skills and beginning to understand tactical play. Talent identification is not based on merely what the player knows at the time of being evaluated but also his ability to learn, develop and progress in his ability to execute his skills. An infinite number of factors interact with the athlete who during their learning as well as being instructed in specific skills, automates them, and assimilates them in the form of rules, and customs acquiring values and principles inherent to their own sport.

Neurons play an important role in the transfer of information to process stimuli and then to execute actions. The creation and functioning of neurons can be modified

by a combination of physical and mental. Physical training increases the number of new neurons while mental training increases the survival of these. When combined mental and physical training with stimulation, cognitive functioning increases.¹⁴

In the cognitive area there is a correspondence between automatic and unconscious. Therefore, we see athletes repeatedly practice one or several actions to get them to become one with these characteristics and thus be able to focus and focus attention on other objectives that have to be approached more consciously (Joan Riera and Pau Riera Brugulat, 2005).¹⁵ Players are required to learn not only each specific skill, but how to integrate those individual skills within a dynamic context or segment of play. That is why the creation of brain maps, is one of the fundamental pillars for the development of a player.

Every football action includes a cognitive element. Players make decisions with the brain playing a role in analysing all the stimuli a player is exposed to and enabling players to make correct decisions. Football decisions are naturalistic and dynamic with players required to make correct decisions while under pressure, with limited time, during various intensities of exercise and sometimes with limited resources and information.^{14,16} The sequences of these actions are not replicated throughout the match nor can they be precisely predicted. The decision-making process in football is a very complex one, requiring a high level of skill. Each player will approach a situation in their own individual ways and rely on a combination of intuition, experience and the laws of the game. The domain specific cognitive mechanisms that experts acquire enable them to anticipate future retrieval demands, correctly predict the outcome of a situation and adapt in a dynamic environment.^{14,16} Acquiring these skills is a process that begins at youth level and should be a core component of talent development.

A player may have high cognitive ability but execution of cognitive skills may be situation-specific with things such as fatigue, lack of concentration, fear and anxiety, self-doubt, arousal level, match situation, history with opponents, muscle tension, injury etc. all impacting level of cognitive functioning. Thus actively training cognitive skills within a football context under different conditions is an important consideration in the training and development of players.¹⁶

Body composition has always been looked at as a component of talent identification. Predicting the players height on maturity can provide information on what types of sport and positions the player is suited for. Additional information can be obtained from biomechanical analysis. Nowadays morphological characteristics should be a secondary determinant in the selection of talents. It is evident that a player with genu valgo had in principle less skills than one with genu varo.

Development of young players is a very systematic and complex process that is vital to the future of the player.¹⁷ Young players are put through very rigorous forms of football education including on-the job training (competitive matches) extensive of-the-job training (Physical conditioning) and cultural induction. Skill development is dependent on a strong physical foundation. Players need to be conditioned to run faster, become stronger and more flexible and agile.^{17,18}

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